

Erika's Story

A historical photograph of a concentration camp entrance. In the foreground, a wooden barrier with diagonal stripes and the word 'BOTEN' on a sign is partially visible. Barbed wire runs across the scene. In the background, a stone building with arched doorways and windows is visible. Several people, including a man in a dark coat and boots, are standing near the entrance. A small metal cart is on the right. The overall tone is somber and historical.

Wander Zee ✡ Roberto Innocenti



It is the winter of 1944. In Nazi-occupied Europe, a Jewish couple realize their fate is sealed and make a heartrending decision so that their infant daughter might live. Ruth

Vander Zee's elegant narration and Roberto Innocenti's searingly beautiful illustrations combine to capture the fear, love, and sadness of a Holocaust survivor's story.

Based on a brief encounter the author had in 1995 with a woman in Germany, the tale weaves first-person fact with

Vander Zee's empathetic imaginings of what must have prompted the greatest act of sacrifice and hope that any parent could make.

Erika's Story



Erika's Story

Written by Ruth Vander Zee

Illustrated by Roberto Innocenti

To my children. Your stars brighten my life.

R. V. Z.



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Designed by Rita Marshall

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Summary: A woman recalls how she was thrown from a train

headed for a Nazi death camp in 1944, raised by someone

who risked her own life to save the baby's, and finally found

some peace through her own family.

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Author's Note



In 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, I met the woman in this story.

My husband and I were sitting on a curb in Rothenburg, Germany, watching a clean-up crew

gather shards of broken roof tile from the city hall. A small tornado had ripped through this

lovely medieval village the night before and scattered rubble everywhere. An elderly mer-

chant standing nearby was telling us that the storm left as much devastation as the last

Allied attack of the war.

When the merchant went back to tending his store, the lady sitting next to us intro-

duced herself as Erika. She asked if we had been traveling. When I told her we had been



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studying in Jerusalem for two weeks, she said, with longing in her voice, that she had always wanted to visit Jerusalem but had never been able to afford the trip.

I noticed she was wearing a Star of David on a gold chain around her neck, so I mentioned that after our stay in Israel, we had driven through Austria and visited the concentration camp in Mauthausen. Erika told me that she had one time gotten as far as the entrance to Dachau but could not bear to enter.

She then told me her story . . .

From 1933 to 1945, six million of my people were killed. Many were shot. Many were starved.

Many were burned in ovens or gassed in chambers. I was not.



I was born sometime in 1944.

I do not know my birthdate.

I do not know my birth name.

I do not know in what city or country I was born.

I do not know if I had brothers or sisters.

What I do know is that when I was just a few months old, I was saved from the Holocaust.



I often imagine what my family's life was like the last few weeks we spent together. I imagine my mother and father robbed of everything they owned, forced from their home, and relocated into a ghetto.

Later, perhaps we were ordered from the ghetto. My parents must have been eager to leave the barbed-wire fenced section of the city to which they had been assigned—to escape the typhus, overcrowding, filth, and starvation. But did they have any notion of where they would go next? Were they told that they were being resettled in a better place? A place where there would be food and work? Had they heard whispered rumors of death camps?









I wonder how they felt when they were herded to the railway station with hundreds of other

Jews. Crammed into a cattle car. Standing room only. Did they panic when they heard the

doors barred shut?



The train must have traveled from one village to another through pastoral landscapes



strangely untouched by terror. How many days were we on that train? How many hours did

my parents stand crushed together?



I imagine my mother holding me close to protect me from the stench, the cries, the fear in-

side that packed car. By now she undoubtedly knew she was not headed to a place of safety,

I wonder where she stood. Was she in the middle of the car? Was my father next to her? Did he

tell her to be brave? Did they talk about what to do?



When did they make their decision?

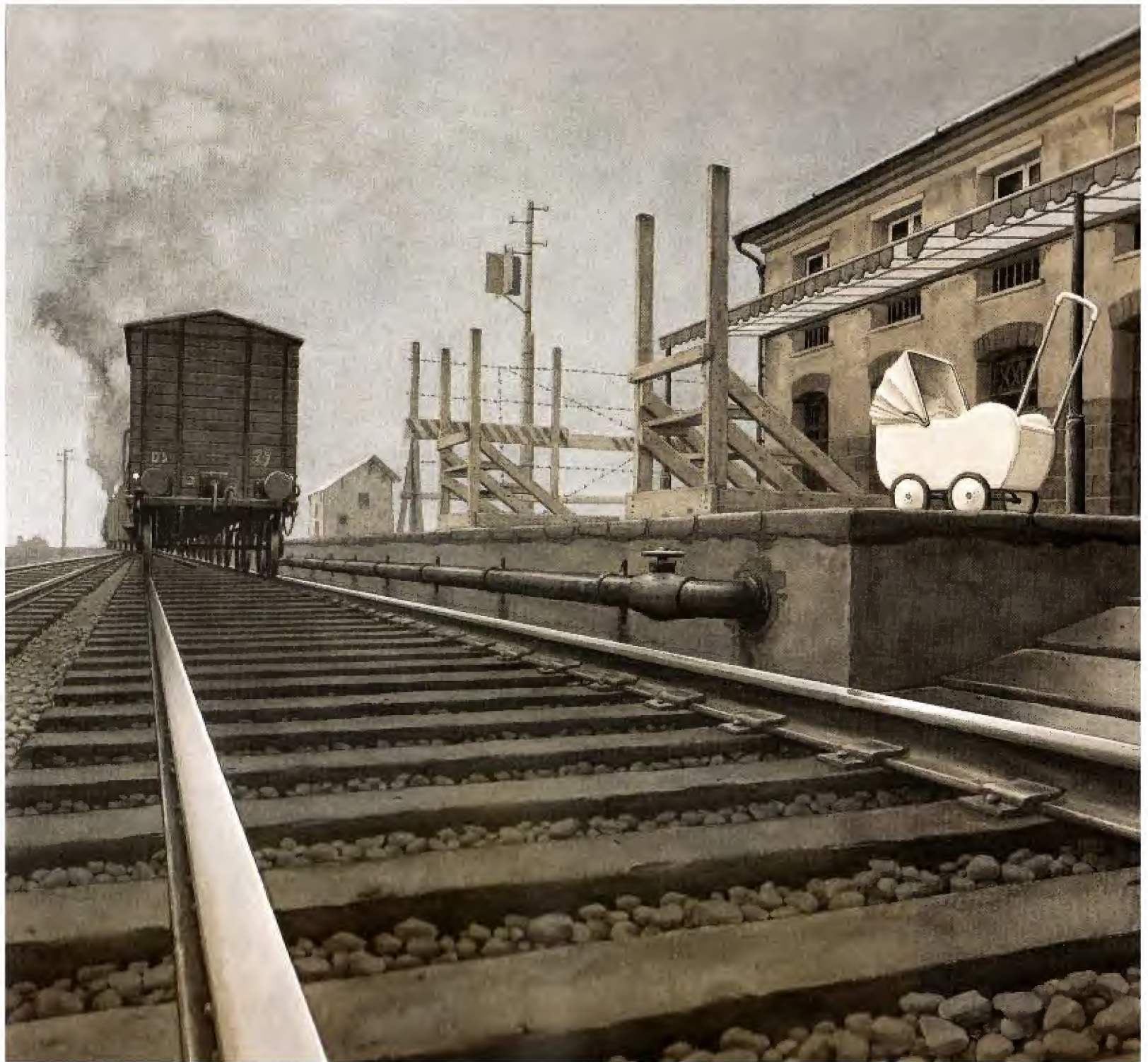
Did my mother say, "Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me"? Did she work her way

through all the people to the wooden wall of the car?

While she wrapped me tightly in a warm blanket, did she whisper my name? Did she

cover my face with kisses and tell me that she loved me? Did she cry? Did she pray?





As the train slowed through a village, my mother must have looked up through the opening

near the top of the cattle car. With my father, she must have tried spreading the barbed wire

that covered the hole. My mother must have lifted me over her head and toward the dim daylight.

What happened next is the only thing I know for sure.



My mother threw me from the train.



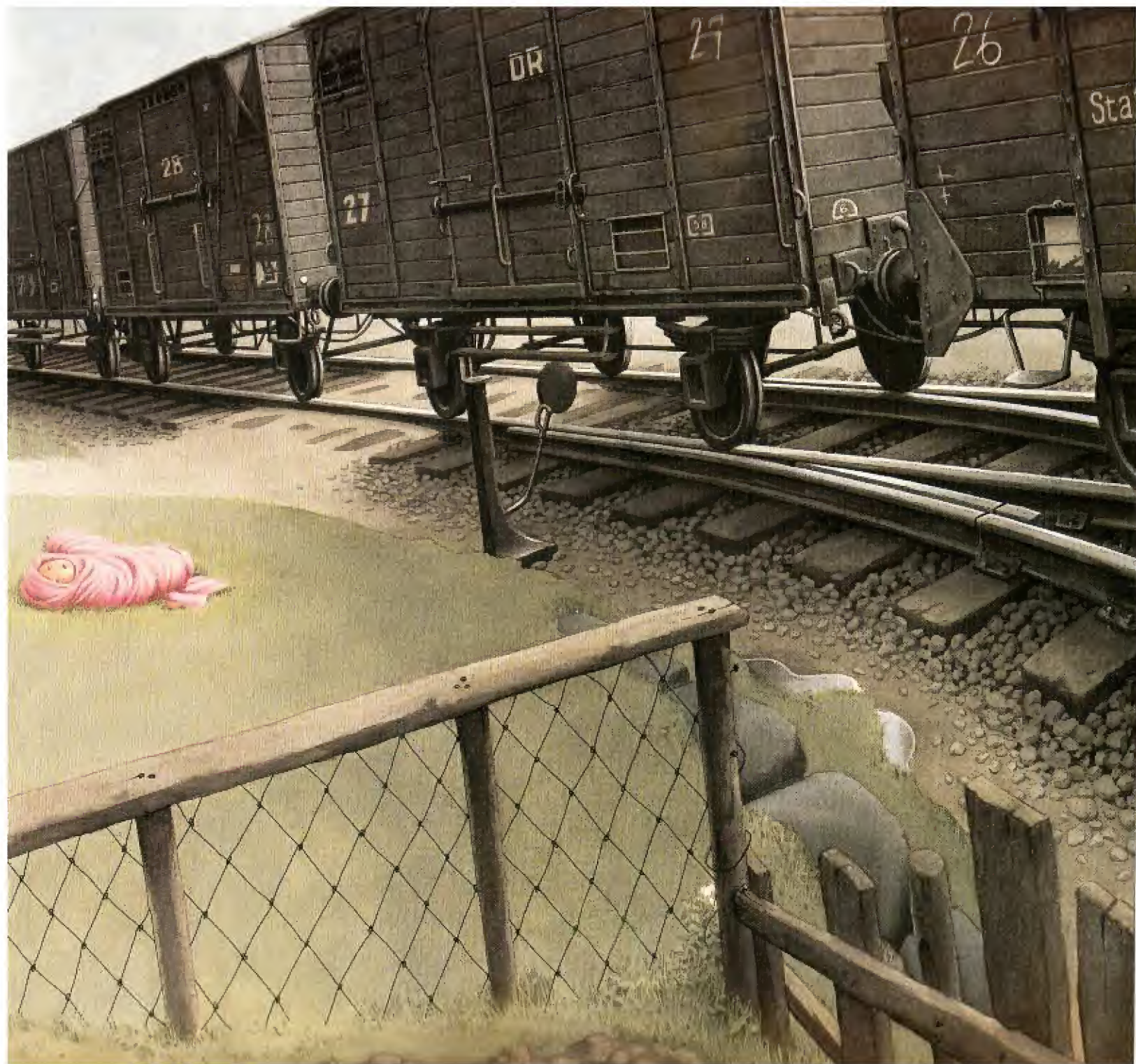


She threw me from the train onto a little patch of grass just past a railway crossing. People standing there, waiting for the train to pass, saw me hurled from that cattle car. On her way to death, my mother threw me to life.



Someone standing nearby picked me up and brought me to a woman who cared for me. She risked her life for me. She estimated my age and gave me a birthdate. She said my name would be Erika. She gave me a home. She fed me, clothed me, and sent me to school. She was good to me.





When I was twenty-one, I married a wonderful man. He lifted the sadness that often filled me,

and he understood my desire to belong to a family. We had three children together, and now they

have children of their own. In their faces, I see mine.



It was once said that my people would be as many as the stars in the heavens. Six million of

those stars fell between 1933 and 1945. Every star was one of my people whose life was

savaged and whose family tree was torn apart.




Today, my tree once again has roots.











Ruth Vander Zee's career as a children's book author began in 2003 with the original publication of *Erika's Story*, which prompted her to write three other titles that feature characters who respond to tragedy with courage and hope. Vander Zee lives with her husband in Miami, Florida.



Roberto Innocenti is a self-taught artist who has earned worldwide acclaim with such illustrated books as *Erika's Story*, *Rose Blanche*, and *The Adventures of Pinocchio*.

In 2008, he was awarded the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award for his contributions to children's literature. He lives in Florence, Italy.

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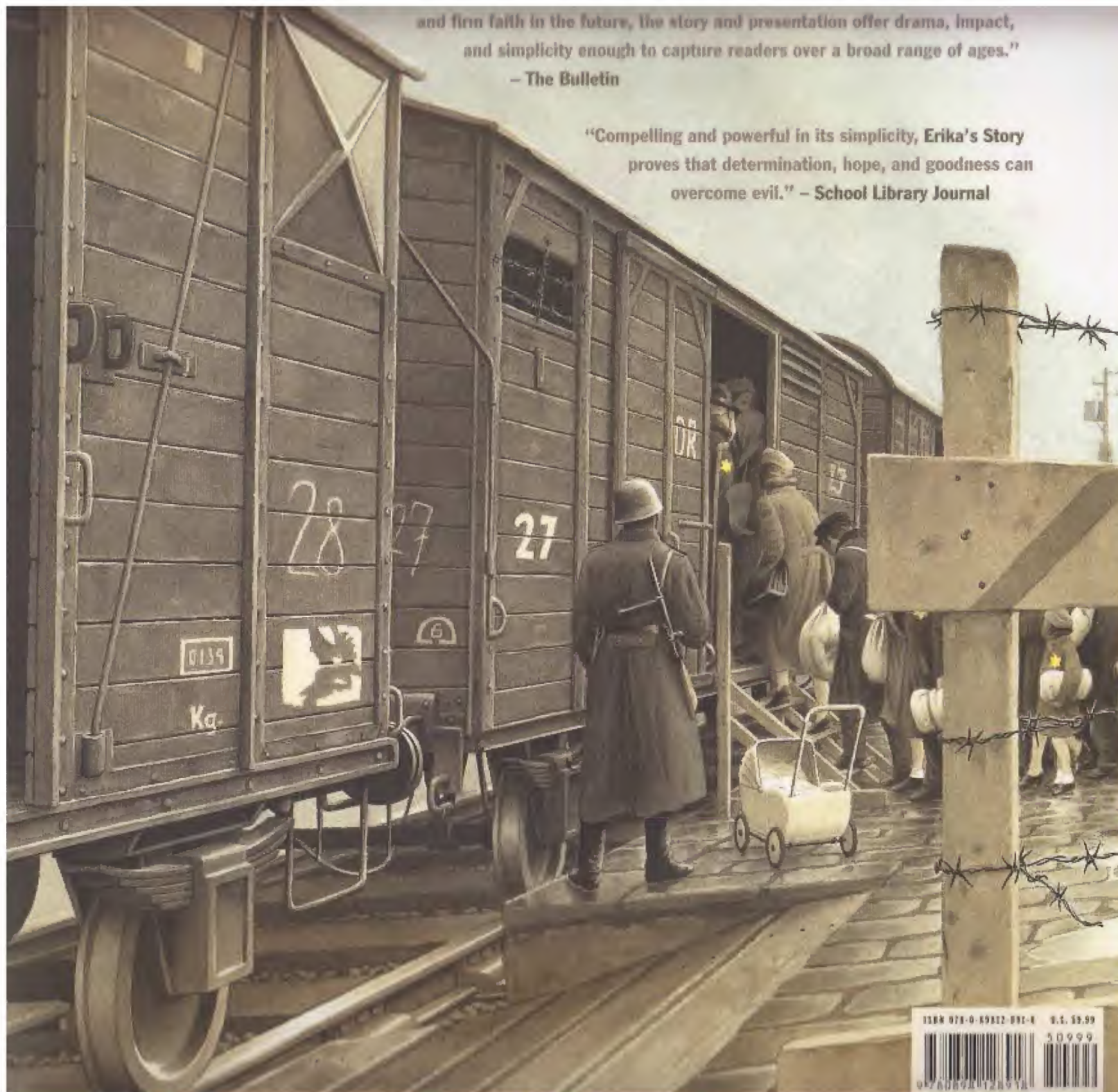
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Designed by Rita Marshall

and firm faith in the future, the story and presentation offer drama, impact, and simplicity enough to capture readers over a broad range of ages."

— The Bulletin

"Compelling and powerful in its simplicity, *Erika's Story* proves that determination, hope, and goodness can overcome evil." — School Library Journal



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